

*** TRANSCRIPT ***

Fishing for customers: How your store atmosphere can become your biggest draw

Podcast interview with Craig Allen, Owner of All Star Wine & Spirits; and Janelle Kozyra, member of the Kimco Realty blogging team

Janelle: Greetings everyone. I am Janelle Kozyra, a member of Kimco Realty's blogging team and today I have with us a special guest. I have with us Craig Allen, who is the owner of All Star Wine & Spirits and he is also soon to be a bit of a TV show personality because he just appeared on "Tanked" which is an Animal Planet reality show, if you're unfamiliar with it, and on the show, the co-host Brett Raymer and Wayde King build these extreme fish tanks for celebrities and other clients out there, and so Craig had the great opportunity to be on the show and had the hosts Brett and Wayde build an awesome fish tank for All Star Wine & Spirits. Craig, it's great to have you with us today. Thanks for joining.

Craig: Well, thank you for inviting me. This has been a fun project.

Janelle: So, just to give a little more background for our listeners, Craig, you have your store located in Kimco's Latham Farm Shopping Center in Latham, New York and so why don't you start by giving us just a bit of an overview first of All Star Wine & Spirits.

Craig: Well, we started here in 1998 and they had just starting putting in the Walmart, a Hannaford, a Sam's Club, what used to be Home Quarters which is now Home Depot, and a Dick's Sporting Goods. So, there was a Mikasa space and they were leaving open-air malls and going to closed air malls. I had recently worked for seven years as a manager at a wine and liquor store and I had been driving up to shop at the Hannaford up here and I saw that space and they said they were moving to a nearby mall, and I was kind of thinking about putting my own store in and I thought this would be a great location to have with all the big box retailers. If they figured this was a good spot, and they spend millions of dollars in their market research, I think I could piggyback upon their brains and say this is probably a good spot for me, too, for a wine and liquor store since there wasn't one around.

And, so in 1998, I got a loan and opened up a 7,500-square-foot store and utilized a lot of their very nice fixtures since they built out a new store in the mall and left all the fixtures there. So I kind of created a real high-end look just based on what was there, and it really caught on. We have the walk-in wine coolers, and I had this little fish tank in the wall that I always wanted in between my office and the store floor, that was a little like 30 gallon one. So, that's how I started out.

About three years later we moved a few doors down when a big Bed Bath & Beyond-style store went out of business and they split they split the space in half. There was 10,000 square feet available, so we moved over and built out that space. Then, probably back in 2006, the ski market that was on the other side of the store moved out and we worked with Kimco to take

that space over. We basically redesigned the entire store and built out one half. We left the wall up and then overnight -- we literally closed at 9:00 on a Saturday and we were open the next day Sunday -- we took out that partition wall, the main wall, and blended the two sides together so it looked like one store. Now we're at a little over 20,000 square feet, I think 20,250, and we take over the main anchor section of the plaza.

So, it's been 15, 16 years now but I love the plaza and the tenants that we have in here. It's a good mix and we've been growing almost double digits every year since we moved here.

Janelle: Wow. That's great to hear, Craig. So, I've got two questions for you. First, why Wine and Spirits? And then I'm going to get into the fish tanks.

Craig: Ah, the wine and spirits is a great one. One of the guys that runs our Internet business here, I grew up with from high school, he was the one that originally brought it up our junior year in college. I was looking to get a job part-time and I went over to the beer store and they said they weren't hiring. Then I went across the street to the wine and liquor store and they gave me a stacking job. So, it was coincidental because of a guy that I worked with, a good friend to this day now. I went from looking to stack shelves at a beer store, and thank God they said no, and I went across the street and I just took an interest in it and worked there through college. After I graduated, I stayed on at the store until I broke off and went over to the Mikasa space in 1998.

Janelle: So, it sounds like you also have an interest in fish and fish tanks and I understand at the Latham Farm Shopping Center there's a koi pond with a bridge and several small aquariums, too. So, was that something that attracted you to the center originally or was that not there yet?

Craig: No, I designed all of that. When I had that first store in Mikasa and I had that little fish tank through the wall, so many people thought it was really cool that they could look into a fish tank. I didn't make it a two-way mirror so everybody was looking in my office all the time, but I was looking out there, so it was kind of a neat thing. I got to see how many people and parents with kids would come in and want to see the fish tank. So when I built the other store, I put a bigger one in through the office window. I did it a little differently than before and again, it worked very, very well. And then I said, you know, I'm going to get another fish tank and put something else in here. I just put it in the front with the wines to give an idea for people if they're having fish, here are some wines. And, that worked out really well, too.

When I opened a restaurant in the plaza I had a chef who was big into fish and had these fresh water Asian cichlids, and I started getting into it. I ended up getting a couple of saltwater tanks in my house, a couple 160- and 150-gallon ones, but I was building a new house and I decided to bring those down to the store. All of a sudden, the store got two big fish tanks so everybody in the store had to kind of learn about the fish to take care of them because now we had four tanks.

Then we added another one, and when we took out the walls over to the former ski market, I wanted to put the little waterfall in. That went from being a little tiny waterfall in the corner of just kind of dead space, to 'Why not build a little koi pond?' And then somebody says, 'Yeah, why not put a bridge over it?' And I'm like, 'Yeah, we'll put a pond on the other side!' And then about \$25,000 later, we got a beautiful koi pond with the waterfall and it's gorgeous, but it was quite a project that we got into. But it all just comes with the look, something different so you don't have to pack your store, every nook and cranny, with trying to sell people something. Make it very relaxing. We have wall-to-wall carpeting in here. You make it very inviting and when people come in, they look and they say, I've never seen a store that looks like this, wine and liquor store, any place in the country. And we really make it that way.

The fish are something that kids love, whether you're selling shoes or books or whatever, you put a fish tank in and it's an amazing thing for customers. It's a sense of ease when they walk in; there are a lot of benefits that I'm finding out because of it. Not that I really knew it before, but it does make sense. It just kind of grew and it's neat, and everybody likes them. I also have my dogs. There's a chocolate lab and a charcoal lab at the store. So, it all fits in, and I'll tell you, the fish tanks are the biggest thing that I've ever seen from a marketing standpoint in my 15 years of business.

Janelle: So, did you research this and really understand the psychological effects that a fish tank and a koi pond can have on customers or was this just, you think this is really neat, let me bring it to the store and see what happens?

Craig: I just did basically that. I just figured, you know, I love marketing. I was a marketing major in college so I enjoyed marketing things; I worked at a little liquor store and the gentleman that was there was in his late 70's so I'd say, 'Hey, I just learned something about setting a shelf. Can I try that?' And he'd say, 'I don't care', you know? So, I would do that, and things would work! Just simple things like shelf sets, and having more profitable products here, common sense stuff. He really let me kind of experiment, and take his store, that used to do \$300,000 for 25 years, and when I left after six years, was doing \$1.8 million at the same location.

So, there were a lot of things that I learned and I kind of took from school that I enjoyed and I would go practice it. Then you just simply know how people are and you know what people like, and you just put something out that's creative and fun. It's better than taking \$1 off of a bottle of vodka or a deal to buy one suit, get one free. There's so much more that people are looking for in shopping than just looking for that deal, and that's not the kind of customer you always want -- somebody that's just looking for the deal. You've got to draw a line at some point. You want people to want to shop because of the experience you're giving them not just because you've got somebody beat by a dollar or you've got them beat by a nickel. That's not how you're going to build your business. That's how you're going to be just chasing customers that are bouncing around. It's good for consumers, but not to build your business.

Janelle: So, how does "Tanked" come in the picture? You got on the show. How did you

coordinate that? How did you make it on there, and why? I mean I can see that you've got this interest, so were you really looking to just take aquariums and fish to the next level? Tell us the story.

Craig: "Tanked" has been out now for a little over three years, I think this is the fourth season, and I watched the show when it first came out because I had the tanks and I thought it was really neat. And we're right next to Saratoga and Saratoga has the race track, and they have a very famous restaurant that's open only six weeks. A lot of people throughout the country fly in and they work there, the employees come from Las Vegas and Florida and Chicago to work for those six weeks at this one restaurant.

A couple of the guys that I know live in Las Vegas year round and come out to go up there, so over the years I've become good friends with them. For the last 15 to 20 years, I mean, we've become great personal friends. One of them brought his new buddy up for the last three years and he came into our store and he saw the fish tanks. He's from Las Vegas and he just started working for the summers there.

It was the first time he had been in my store but I had known him for a few years and he said, 'Geez, I've got a friend that builds fish tanks out in Vegas,' and I'm like, 'Oh yeah?' And he goes, 'Yeah, they've got a store, he's got a TV show, too.' And I'm like, 'What is it?' He goes, 'I don't know.' I go, 'Is it Tanked?' And he said, 'I don't know.' I go, 'Who's your buddy?' And he said, 'Brett.' I go, 'Brett Raymer's your friend?' And he goes, 'Yeah, Brett and I are great buddies.' I go, 'Paul, you don't know him!' And he picks his phone up in the store and says, 'Hey Brett, I'm in a store in Albany, New York or Latham in my buddy's wine store and he's got a bunch of fish tanks and I told him that you got some TV show and he says you're in Tanked, right?'

So, I'm like, 'You don't even know your friend's TV show, give me the phone.' And there was Brett Raymer. I'm like, oh my God. I go, 'Hey, I love your show. I've got a bunch of tanks!' And I was kind of in awe, but he was cool and he said, 'Hey, if you're ever in Vegas, stop over. I'll take you around.' I went out to Vegas this past summer, actually, and my buddy said to look him up. So I went over and visited, and the producers from Animal Planet happened to be right there that day. And they're taking me around and I said, 'I got this idea for a big wine bottle; I want to make a fish tank out of it and they have it look like sunken vineyard, like if Napa Valley got flooded someday, what would it look like the fish are swimming around the vineyard and the little clusters of grapes?' They all thought it sounds pretty cool. They said, 'When you go back to New York, if you want, send us a little sketch of what you're talking about and let us see and we'll go from there.'

So, I sent it back to them and they thought it was really neat and they were like, how big of a tank do you want? I said I didn't know, and, then they said, if you make something big and neat this might be something we could use for the TV show. So, then they came up and we batted some ideas around, and they liked it, and so it kind of went from there and filled out. Since I'd known them and had a mutual friend, that was a good friend, they kind of said, we want to do this tank and it went from being a little six-foot tank to being now a 17-foot tank with 600

gallons. It just kept expounding, but in order to make this on the show, you know, it has to be something really extravagant. And twist my arm! I was like, alright, let's do it, there's goes the marketing! I said sorry to my TV and radio and everybody, I said, you've got no budget this quarter, but we're going to put it all into this and see what happens. And, I'll tell you, it was the smartest thing I think I've ever done.

Janelle: So, tell us about the tank. What are the fish that are inside? What does it look like?

Craig: So the base of it looks like the bottom of the wine bottle and that's three feet high. Then the actual tube, or the main part of the bottle, is 7.5 feet high, and then the top of the bottle, like where you would have the cork and all that, and the neck of it going up, that's where it houses all the lights and everything. So, that's like a dark green acrylic so it looks like the label and stuff on the top of the bottle and it's wrapped with a foil. There's little door you can get into there to feed them and to do all the cleaning and stuff up in the top. By the time you're done, it's almost 17 feet. So it goes right almost to the deck of the store. It's lit up and then inside it's got the grape vines hanging so the fish swim in and out of these long hanging vines from the top and it looks like 3D when you look through it.

On the back of the tank, they have put prints and it's a lot of different prints, I guess, so we'll see when the show airs what it took and how they did it. But it's pretty neat and it just looks like you're poking your head through a vineyard and you just see the rolling hills behind it. Then it's got a really neat thing, which was a surprise for me, is a tap they added, so there's a little truck with a bell on the back inside of the tank and the wine would go from the back of the store and pour through. So we have a tap you can actually do a wine tasting out of, the front of the bottle is tapped with a little wine corkscrew. It's pretty neat.

Janelle: That's really cool. So, do you rotate the wines that you can taste out of the fish tank?

Craig: Oh yeah. Yeah. Whatever we want to do we can pour it through there and feature it.

Janelle: Great. So, what was this whole process like of creating and designing this fish tank and how involved were you in the creative behind it?

Craig: I was involved a lot, I was pretty much hands on and designed it from my head. And I've got to tell you, it is exactly what my guy here, we have an in-house graphic artist, and I had him make my sketching look the way I would if I could draw and use his hands with my head. It looked nice, so sent it to them and what they came out with is just amazing. It really is. It came out unbelievable and it's truly unique. I mean it really is a huge wine bottle and when you look at something that's four feet wide, 17 feet high that it looks like a big bottle, when you walk around with all the fish going up and down and around, it's really neat.

Janelle: So, you had a big reveal, I understand, on February 7th, for the public. What was that like?

Craig: That was pretty neat because we were doing a wine tasting with it and we didn't really, we didn't spend any money advertising. We just did a press release to tell everybody what was going on and we had the TV stations and the newspapers and radio and everybody show up and along with that, they kind of, originally, when they do reveals, if you have ever seen the show, they've done them in businesses before and there's 20 or 30 people. They'll have customers come in and I told them, we're probably going to have more than that because we've been promoting it and Eddie's Aquarium, which is the aquarium store I use, was promoting it on their Facebook and so have we to our people. So there might be more and they said 'Don't worry, we've been doing this for years and we understand, we know how to control the crowd.' Well, as things got going towards the 7:00 mark we were kind of promoting the reveal, there was probably 600 to 700 people in the store. They were parking in front of Sam's Club people were telling us because there was not one spot on this side of Latham Farms to park and the north where the traffic came in off the highway to the exit was backed up trying to get in here. I mean, it was so packed and those guys sat and signed autographs and took pictures with probably 250 kids for an hour and a half after. I mean, they're very, very nice and again, genuine, the whole entire cast and crew people. It was a neat experience and they gave everybody a great time here, all the fans that were out there and since then, it's been amazing the amount of people that have come in too. I mean, we've literally probably had I'd say 1,500 new people in three weeks.

Janelle: Wow. That's amazing. How would you sum up this whole experience for you, with all of your interest in the fish tanks and knowing how it resonates with customers and creates that really fun in-store customer experience and the culmination of being on "Tanked"? Where are you at now kind of mentally and from a business perspective?

Craig: Well, I'm thinking about how many opportunities are out there and in talking with Brett and Wayne for a while, they said if you ever get a chance when you're on TV or you have a show or something like that, they said, take advantage of it. Like when they had their show, they said they didn't know if it was going to last for one season, for one episode or what, but what it's done for their business, he can't explain. He said they probably have almost \$200 million worth of marketing because of this show, you know? It doesn't cost them for the show, they actually get paid. But the value of the marketing, being in 70 countries, and the amount of business and the business things that they have overseas now shipping aquariums. I mean, I looked at one tank that they had that was like \$1 million going to Dubai. It was unbelievable.

So, it's making me really think about how you can take Internet, how you can use things like this right here in marketing to get your name out there. We ship wine and liquor all over the country, and we have a lot of high end and esoteric things. You're not selling your bottle of Kendall Jackson or White Zinfandel online. People can get that anywhere at their neighborhood store. You've got to look to have a lot of the other unique things like we have.

Opportunities like this show have made me think about other ways that you do unique marketing instead of just the regular print, radio, TV. I know my advertisers hate me when I say all that, but my TV guys were in today shaking their head because they're like, 'You were right,

you got a ton of press.’ This has really worked great so we’re going parlay into the show with new TV commercials I just started today that will be promoting the show on March 28th at 10 p.m. and then to come in to our in-store on Sunday, March 30th for our annual winter wine tasting, which we just kind of moved to that weekend to match with our marketing efforts. We usually have 700 people at our Sunday tastings when we do this twice a year. We’ll probably have over 1,000 this year because people are going to have already seen the show, want to come in and now they’ve got a reason to come taste wine and food while they’re here. That could be one of our busiest days of the year, I think.

Janelle: So, we’ve got our calendars marked then. March 28th, 10 p.m. is the airing of the show and then your wine tasting is on the 30th. So, are you doing anything aquarium or fish related at your wine tasting on the 30th?

Craig: Oh yeah. We’ll have some fish-related wines and I might have one of my buddies in who’s a winemaker. He might be in town and might actually pour his wine through the aquarium. So, if he’s here, I’ll defer to him for letting him put his stuff on there but if it’s just going to be some one of the staff, we’ll probably put one of our fish wines and we actually have wines, a pesce vino, in a fish bottle, looks like a fish, so we might pour that through. That will be fun.

Janelle: Cool. Just be careful you don’t actually swallow fish.

Craig: Oh yeah. No. They don’t come out and we use an awful lot of water.

Janelle: Alright. Well, Craig, it was a pleasure talking with you and we’re super excited to see the show air on March 28th.

Craig: Great. Well thank you. Yeah. It’s going to be exciting and I’m kind of anxious to see how it all got put together.

Janelle: Well best of luck with you with all of your adventures at All Star Wine & Spirits. I’m sure you’re going to have something cool cooking in the future, too, so we look forward to seeing it, and best of luck to you.

Craig: Great. Well thank you very much.

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